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FM AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0820
RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE
RHMFIISS/CJTF HOA

UNCLAS KHARTOUM 000737

DEPT FOR AF/SPG, A/S FRAZER, SE WILLIAMSON
NSC FOR HUDSON AND PITTMAN
DEPT PLS PASS USAID FOR AFR/SUDAN
ADDIS ABABA ALSO FOR USAU

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL PREF EAID MOPS KPKO SU
SUBJECT: HEAVY FIGHTING BETWEEN SPLA AND SAF IN ABYEI

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Heavy fighting has broken out and continues between SPLA and SAF forces in the town of Abyei, despite UNMIS efforts to broker a ceasefire. With both the NCP and SPLM distracted by other crises, the UN is concerned that the situation could deteriorate further if the fighting spreads to units located around the town. The majority of the town's population has fled the fighting and some NGO international staff are trapped in their compounds by the fighting. End summary.

SAF-SPLA Battle in Abyei

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¶2. (SBU) Heavy fighting is taking place between SAF and SPLA forces in the disputed town of Abyei. The UN is concerned that the already serious situation could easily escalate, given the near proximity of additional SPLA and SAF units that could enter the town and join the fight. The fighting reportedly began late May 13 with an impromptu clash at an SPLM police post. The circumstances of the initial clash remain murky at this time, but both SPLA and SAF units quickly became involved and the fighting continued into May 14 and intensified. Following a lull on Wednesday afternoon, it resumed, reportedly involving the use of weapons as heavy as mortars and RPGs. In spite of a meeting arranged by UNMIS between the two sides to discuss a ceasefire fighting has continued. Most of the SPLM's leadership in the area is in Juba for the National Convention, including SPLM Rep Edward Lino.

Civilians Flee, NGOs Trapped

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¶3. According to UN sources in Abyei reports that 30,000 people, the bulk of the town's population, have fled into the surrounding countryside. The UN is attempting to organize an emergency relief effort to support this new wave of IDPs. Late May 14, UNMIS was in the process of evacuating NGO international staff to Kadugli via helicopter. International staff of two NGOs, GOAL International and Save the Children, reportedly were unable to reach the UNMIS compound and were forced to return to their own locations, where they remain. UNMIS security in Abyei is attempting to devise a plan to extract both groups to the UNMIS compound in order to fly them out.

¶4. (SBU) According to the UN official, efforts to mediate a ceasefire have been hampered by the absence of senior SPLM/SPLA leadership from Abyei to whom they could reach out. SPLM Administrator Edward Lino is in Juba to attend the SPLM national convention there. The senior, and much respected, SPLA commander of the local Joint Integrated Unit (JIU) also is absent.

¶5. (SBU) In a meeting with ConGen Juba staff, Edward Lino corroborated much of the UN's account. He said that fighting is between SAF and SPLA security and that more SPLA are likely to join the fighting. He confirmed that large numbers of civilians (he said 50,000) have fled the fighting. Embassy and Consulate Juba are seeking to reach out to both the GNU/SAF and SPLM/SPLA to calm the situation and try to halt the fighting. CDA Fernandez spoke to MFA

U/S Mutriff Siddiq the evening of May 14 about the clashes. The NCP is also distracted with their focus on the aftermath of the JEM rebel group's attack on the capital and confrontation with Chad. Siddiq promised to alert colleagues in the regime to exercise restraint.

Comment

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¶6. (SBU) Given the support that the SPLA provided Khartoum during the JEM raid on Omdurman a few days ago, and the NCP's effusive gratitude as a result, this outbreak of fighting appears to have been the result of an unintended clash, rather than anything calculated. As we have reported previously, the tensions inherent in the situation and SPLM-NCP brinksmanship have made Abyei a disaster waiting to happen. All it took was a spark to ignite a possible conflagration.

FERNANDEZ